# Wales Audit Office (WAO) report on local government use of data: Report and Action Plan

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| **Purpose:** | To brief the Panel on progress on the Council's Action Plan developed in response to the Wales Audit Office study and report: "The maturity of local government in use of data". |
| **Content:** | The report sets out the background to the study, previous Scrutiny reports, and progress on the Action Plan for each of the eleven identified recommendations across the four areas of the original study. |
| **Councillors are being asked to:** | Consider the information provided. |
| **Lead Councillor:** | Councillor Andrea Lewis, Cabinet Member for Service Transformation |
| **Lead Officer:** | Sarah Lackenby |
| **Report Author:** | Steve King |
| **Legal Officer:** **Finance Officer:** | Debbie Smith Jeff Dong |
| **For Information** | |

## 1. Introduction

1.1 In December 2018, the Wales Audit Office (WAO) published the results of a study on how local authorities in Wales were making use of data in order to inform their decision making. Reports were published for Wales and individual local authorities. In June 2019, the Panel received an initial highlight report detailing the key findings of the WAO study for Swansea, followed in March 2020 by an updated report and Action Plan

which responded to each of the eleven identified recommendations across the four areas of the study.

1.2 The initial report to Scrutiny briefed panel members on the key findings of the WAO study, which were divided into four areas as follows:
- Vision, Leadership and Culture;
- Data protection;
- Skills and capacity; and
- Evidence-based decision making.

1.3 Accompanying the second report to Scrutiny (2 March 2020) was an action plan which listed the eleven individual WAO recommendations for Swansea within each of the four above headings and summary information on each.

1.4 The previous Panel report and action plan centred on the WAO's recommendation that Councils should have an overall strategy and vision for the use of data, which would provide a framework for considering subsequent actions. At that time, our intentions were to scope, plan and develop a strategy during the following year (2020-21).

1.5 Unfortunately, progress since was severely impacted by the pandemic (beginning, in effect, very soon after that Panel meeting). Of course, this had profound, far-reaching impacts on all Council services over a long period. However, as we have gradually moved towards a post-pandemic recovery phase, many aspects of the Council's work and projects have been able to resume, albeit subject to review, priorities and resources.

1.6 In terms of the issues raised by the WAO study and the previous report, progress has been made and events have moved on in several respects. All of the eleven specific recommendations are considered closed. This report summarises this, with more specific detail also included within the action plan update (Appendix A).

**2. WAO study recommendations: Vision, Leadership and Culture**

2.1 WAO's opening recommendation was that local authorities should *have a clear vision that treats data as a key resource*. The study found that local authorities across Wales are slow to develop a culture that values and uses data effectively to improve services and outcomes. Swansea, in common with most Councils, does not currently have a specific, separate strategy relating to 'data'. Therefore, WAO proposed that an overall strategy and vision for the use of data should be developed which would provide a framework for considering subsequent actions.

2.2 On 20 April Cabinet approved a digital strategy for the council covering the period 2023-28 which contains our strategy for the use of data. Our specific goal is to ensure we have accessible data that supports communities and council performance, recognising the importance of data and business intelligence in understanding needs, informing

decision-making and service design.  The strategy sets out what the Council has done to date and what will be done by 2028.

2.4     The three remaining original recommendations in this part of the WAO study are also now considered closed.  These recommendations were around *establishing corporate data standards and coding* (to make integration of data across services easier); *auditing data held by services* (to reduce duplication/waste and enable data sharing); and *creating a central integrated customer account as a gateway to services*.  The key issues around each were outlined in the previous Panel report.

2.5     Further consideration of corporate data standards and data held by services would follow the development of the data framework outlined previously.  This could build on longstanding work on address data standards for the authority's Local Land and Property Gazetteer (LLPG) and the recent full review of the authority's Information Asset Register as part of the data migration (SharePoint) project during 2022.

2.6     Progress on WAO's integrated customer account recommendation has continued via the upgrade of the Council website (launched in August 2021) and more recent developments in the 'Swansea Account' project.  Its recent focus has been on advocating and promoting campaigns related to six key issues: Cost of Living; Business Rates Relief; Free School Meals payments; Uniform Grants; Unpaid Carers and Fuel Support.  Further work on the project, including the customer-experience aspects, is continuing.

## 3.      Data protection

3.1     This part of the WAO report focused on the balance between the benefits and risks of data sharing.  The Council's work on data protection issues clearly remains ongoing; however the two specific recommendations in this area are considered closed.  Specifically the Council was recommended to *provide refresher training to service managers*.  The guidance on the Council's Staffnet pages continues to be reviewed and promoted.  Recently, mandatory on-line training around data protection and cyber security has become available as a module within the "Learning" platform on Oracle Fusion – launched in April 2023 (replacing Learning Pool).

3.2     Authorities were also recommend by WAO to *review and update data sharing protocols*.  The Wales Accord on the Sharing of Personal Information (WASPI) provides the key framework to enable this.  During 2023, WASPI are consulting on a new Code of Conduct – which would set a fixed framework for external data sharing and a model for internal data sharing.  In addition, a digital tool is being developed on the WASPI website which would allow each participating member to develop a central register of its WASPI agreements.  This would initially require, subject to resources, an audit of the Council's existing Information Sharing Protocols (ISPs).

**4.      Skills and capacity**

4.1     WAO made two recommendations around staff skills and capacity; firstly to *identify staff who have a role in analysing and managing data*, and secondly to *invest and support the development of staff data analytical, mining and segmentation skills*.

4.2     In the latest Council Workforce Strategy and Plan, Strand 7 focuses on workforce learning and development (L&D), with associated actions proposed including a corporate Development Needs Analyses (DNA) in 2023-24.  Skills needs at a post level are identifiable through role profiles and the appraisals process.  However, the roll-out of Oracle Fusion, which includes e-learning and analytics elements, may improve our business intelligence on this.   This would be subject to further investigation, planning and identification of resources. .

**5.      Evidence-based decision making**

5.1     The fourth area highlighted by the study relates to the use of evidence in decision-making, in order to create a "data-driven decision-making culture".  The three WAO recommendations here involved *setting data reporting standards,* to *make more open data available,* and to *review the range of information needed by decision makers*.

5.2     These issues are viewed as on-going, business-as-usual considerations, and the WAO recommendations here are now considered closed. Established systems are in place to work with services to review and improve data reporting standards.  The updated council website (since August 2021) was designed to improve accessibility to information for Swansea citizens but will also have helped the Council's own decision-makers.   However, further reflection and necessary action on these particular recommendations can follow the data framework when in place.

5.3     WAO see the use of in open data local government as "an important characteristic of data maturity" which can assist the development of new businesses and enable better data sharing.  Goal 4 of the draft Digital Strategy 2023-28 includes a commitment to *"Make open data available to communities and involve service users to improve the accuracy of data"*.  The agenda around open data in Welsh local government is also being taken forward by Data Cymru via their Open Data Wales Portal, and we will look for suitable opportunities to engage with this process.

**6.      General Issues**

6.1     The WAO reports encompassed a wide range of linked but discrete areas and issues around the use of data within its four broad themes. There remains more to be done across all of these areas in different

ways, and progress on these matters will be reported within the standard frameworks.

6.2    Following this Scrutiny Panel meeting, and subject to the Panel's views, it is proposed that the report be circulated to the Council's Audit Committee for information.

## 7.    Financial Implications

7.1    There are no specific implications related to this report. Any financial implications arising from the action plan will be assessed on a project by project basis, from within existing budget resources.

## 8.    Legal Implications

8.1    There are no legal implications associated with this report.

**Background Papers:**
- Report of the Leader and Cabinet Member for Economy & Strategy to the Service Improvement & Finance Scrutiny Performance Panel, 2 March 2020: *Wales Audit Office (WAO) report on local government use of data: Report and Action Plan.*
  https://democracy.swansea.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=591&MId=8619&Ver=4&LLL=0
- Report of the Cabinet Member for Business Transformation & Performance to the Service Improvement & Finance Scrutiny Performance Panel, 24 June 2019: *WAO report on local government use of data: Swansea findings.*
  https://democracy.swansea.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=591&MId=8599&Ver=4&LLL=0
- Wales Audit Office (WAO) report: *The maturity of local government in use of data, December 2018.*
  https://www.audit.wales/publication/maturity-local-government-use-data
- WAO report: *Local government use of data – City and County of Swansea, December 2018.*
  https://www.audit.wales/publication/city-and-county-swansea-use-local-government-data

**Appendices:**
 **Appendix A**    WAO Study – Action Plan update.